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Love story ends in woe for a lonely CIA clerk

By Pam McClintock
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Touching down in Accra, Ghana, to begin her new assignment, former CIA clerk Sharon M. Scranage was met by U.S. Embassy officials and whisked away to her new home at the end of a one-way street miles away from any Americans.

When the welcoming team left after a 15-minute visit, Scranage broke down and cried, overcome by isolation and the strangeness of her surroundings.

The next day, two men arrived at Scranage's doorstep. One was a State Department employee. The other was Michael A. Soussoudis, a Ghanaian who would become Scranage's companion and lover.

This week, Scranage, 30, again wept as she was sentenced to five years in prison after admitting in September that she passed classified information to Mr. Soussoudis, a cousin of Ghanaian leader Jerry Rawlings, while working at the CIA station in Accra from May 1983 to May 1985.

"I am just glad that God brought me home alive," Scranage said.

Also this week, Mr. Soussoudis, who was lured to this country in June and arrested along with Scranage, was given 24 hours to leave the United States and return to Ghana as part of a spy swap between the two countries.

And so ended the story of how a CIA clerk who had spent most of her life surrounded by friends and family in Virginia's rural King George

County was unable, in her own words, to see that she was being wooed by an alleged intelligence officer for Ghana.

"The day she gets off the plane, out he [Mr. Soussoudis] comes. That is the astounding thing," said Brian Gettings, Scranage's defense attorney.

"She is a casualty," he said. "She not only regrets it, she couldn't feel worse about it."

Taking the stand during a sentencing hearing in U.S. District Court in

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Alexandria, Scranage described how she turned over secret information to Mr. Soussoudis not out of greed or desire for power, but out of anguish and love.

Scranage's statements provided a glimpse into the world of espionage during the same week the U.S. government arrested four more suspects on spying charges.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Justin Williams said the information Scranage gave to Mr. Soussoudis regarding the activities of Ghanaian dissidents damaged the interests of the United States.

Scranage, however, fully cooperated with law enforcement officials once she returned to the United States and was instrumental in luring Mr. Soussoudis to this country, Mr. Williams said.

Scranage testified that she asked to be assigned to the CIA station in Ghana, hoping to forget a divorce and a CIA colleague who had broken off their engagement two days before their wedding in order to marry another woman.

"I wanted to run away," Scranage said.

She said she then fell in love with Mr. Soussoudis, who once hosted a birthday party for her at his five-bedroom house equipped with servant quarters and a pool.

But before sentencing, U.S. District Judge Richard Williams reminded Scranage that she had assured the CIA that she had the good character and emotional stamina to carry out an overseas assignment.

Mr. Soussoudis, who pleaded no contest to charges of receiving classified information before he was released, has denied that he is an intelligence officer for his country.

"He was just a guy trying to protect his country," said Plato Cacheris.

Mr. Cacheris said Mr. Soussoudis didn't even know that Scranage was a CIA employee until several months after they began dating.

But Mr. Gettings said that CIA officials in Ghana knew that Scranage had been targeted by Mr. Soussoudis, but that they did not tell her. He said that had she had known she was being used, she never would have carried on the relationship.

"Ultimately, the security of the United States depends on the integrity, patriotism and selflessness of each employee of the CIA and every other agency," Mr. Williams said.